DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 335 JC 820 043

AUTHOR Staples, Katherine E.
TITLE A Writing Course for Elders: Outreach, Growth, Synthesis.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Community College Humanities Association Conference (Farmer's Branch, TX, October 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Adult Students; Autobiographies; Community Colleges; Creative Writing; Expository Writing; *Middle Aged Adults; *Older Adults; *Poetry; Student Educational Objectives; Student Motivation; Two Year Colleges; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a personal approach to the special pedagogical requirements of teaching writing courses for elders and specifically examines courses in poetry writing, expository prose, and prose fiction, taught to persons over 55 under the auspices of the Institute of Lifetime Learning, a nonprofit, self-supporting institution associated with Austin Community College. First, the instructor's assumptions about teaching courses for elder students and the attitudes of elder students are discussed. Next, the initial problems arising from the different goals and interests of the students in the poetry writing course are outlined. Then, problems of course structure, student sensitivity about their work, and the students' lack of acquaintance with each other are detailed together with the instructor's solutions. Next, the reasons for the failure of a course in autobiography taught outside the normal institutional setting are explored. The process of obtaining a grant for the publication of student memoirs and poetry and the students' involvement in the project is outlined. Finally, the conclusions reached about teaching courses to elders, i.e., that the process does not differ greatly from teaching younger students except that the former have more years, more memories, and some diminution of physical abilities, are discussed and the particular rewards of teaching elder students indicated. (HB)

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A WRITING COURSE FOR ELDERS: OUTREACH, GROWTH, SYNTHESIS.

Katherine E. Staples
Austin Community College
Austin, Texas

Paper Presented at the Community College Humanities Association Conference, Farmer's Branch, Texas October 1981.

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A WRITING COURSE FOR ELDERS: OUTREACH, GROWTH, SYNTHESIS

There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

I decided to begin my talk on writing programs for elders with this passage from "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" because it is, among other things, a poem about aging and time. Elders who decide to take a course in writing have decided to take time to learn about a time consuming form they never had time for before. And they are far more aware of the value of the time they have chosen to spend than younger people are. A class for elders also forces an instructor, particularly an instructor from the world of college credit courses, to rethink structure, content, motivation, class development, leadership, and fallability. And, perhaps most important, my students at the Institute of Lifetime Learning, an educational institution for persons 55 and older, have made me see "Prufrock" in a way I never could or did before: as a poem of regeneration.

My experience with teaching elders began in the Fall of 1979. I was interested in applications of community education and I had heard of the Institute. It was non-profit and self-supporting, associated with the American Association of Retired Persons. It is currently associated with Austin Community College. The Austin branch of the Institute, founded in 1977 with seven course offerings, had grown to a student enrollment of about 300 and 20 course offerings. Classes lasted two hours and met once a week.for eight weeks. There was a fee; eacg student was charged $8.00 per course. A small honorarium was paid to teachers. Space was donated by church and city

groups. Since course offerings were determined by polling past students, I was fairly certain that my course in poetry was wanted.

However, I walked into my first class meeting with a copy of The Norton Anthology of Poetry (long version) under my arm and a slightly uneasy feeling. I had had no experience at all teaching elders segregated by age. I had no expectations except that everybody in the class would be 55 or older, that there would be no more than 15 class members, and that everybody was interested enough to pay the $8.00 fee. I wondered: "Am I too young? Is my preparation to teach okay? Does it matter that I am a literary translator, composition teacher, and literary historian, not a poet? Will I offend anybosy? Are these sweet little old persons? What am I going to do?"

I had decided to have a 15 minute break in the middle of class -- for me to catch my breath and to meet some of the students personally. I had selected a few poems for reading and discussion, enough so that we could adapt our class to the interests of its members. "Robert Frost has to be okay," I thought. "Nobody gets offended at 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.'" And that was how I began.

After I had introduced myself to the class, I had each class member do the same, going on to discuss his or her expectations of the course. I found that my group was serious, but that its interests were diverse.

*Some wanted to read and discuss old favorite poems.

* Some wanted to read modern poetry, to explore new forms and unusual styles -- things they hadn't read before.

* Some wanted to begin writing poetry for the first time.

* Some, already accomplished authors, wanted detailed criticisms of their work. Several were members of the local poetry society. Some had published.

* One had read little poetry, but expected that poets wrote chiefly about positive and uplifting subjects.

Together, after our mutual introductions, the class devised a plan. The seven remaining class meetings would each have readings assigned by theme. We also decided to divide our time between our readings by established poets and student work, which we would read aloud, requesting comment. And so the course began.

I'd like to go over the problems I encountered that first semester and the solutions the class and I found for them.

PROBLEM: Since we had no text, I had to prepare readings, typing, mimeographing, and photocopying. This was a time consuming process, especially since I had a large credit courseload elsewhere.

SOLUTION: We adopted the Norton Anthology of Poetry for use in future poetry classes. It was paperback, offered comprehensive selections, and was a good book to own. Those unable to buy a copy were able to share or to use other readers.

PROBLEM: Our class continued to have many different needs, come of which I was not prepared to meet. After all, I was not, am still not a poet.

SOLUTION: I determined to keep class meetings flexible. Our discussions could include personal experiences associated with poems, comments on form, imitations of poems, and discussions of the meaning and significance of what we read. I would freely admit ignorance and ask for help and ideas.

PROBLEM: The class member who expected poetry to be uplifting was greatly upset by a discussion of a poem by Ann Sexton and left, never to return.

SOLUTION: None. The other class members had enjoyed the discussion of the poem and had been active in it. I determined to begin future classes with an announcement that we were adults and free to discuss any theme, any subject, and any poem. This, it turned out, would be the right approach. No other person with such rigidly defined expectations of the content of poetry would enroll in a class.

Elders are not vestals, prudes, or cloistered fools. They read newspapers, and, like the rest of us, watch as much tv as they can stand. As one class member puts it, "When I hear people talking about sweet little old ladies, I generally tell them that they will have to omit one and probably both of the first two adjectives. "

PROBLEM: Some writers, particularly thosw who were just beginning to write, were acutely sensitive about their work and found criticism painful. Others were more interested in expressing personal feelings than in working with poetic form.

SOLUTION: I tried to make all comments supportive and to acknowledge the daring it takes to share a new poem in first draft or an account of a deeply personal feeling. The class joined me in this effort to respect feelings. We could always add more specific comments when requested to do so. As we came to know one another better, we all became friendly; criticism was easier to give and accept.

PROBLEM: Many members of the group were initially unacquainted with one another.

SOLUTION: We introduced ourselves to one another at intervals and at coffee breaks. Some Institute literature classes wore name tags; all prepared directories for distribution. We all made an effort to have our classes friendly social events as well as intellectual discussions.

PROBLEM: As the semester went on, people became friendly, but did not meet outside class.

SOLUTION: Each literature class prepared a semester book of poems and short prose pieces, photocopied, bound, and paid for by subscription. The last class day would be partly spent as an autograph party. We all had a sense of friendship, accomplishment, and shared experience.

At the end of my first semester, I sat down to review what I had learned. First, I had found that motivation in such a group does not depend on externals -- like credit, grades, or even teacher's approval -- but on friendship, shared ideas, and new writing experiences. My job in this was to acknowledge each member according to his or her needs, Second, I had found that people's intellectual interests were personal, not academic. People pursued ideas, wrote poems, and contributed these to the class. And since our group was made up of people with a variety of different experiences, this was a fine contribution to make. Third, I had learned to relax in the classroom as never before. I had to lead, but in response to the class. I was now ready to spend more time on one poem, if discussion went well, to the detriment of discussion of several others. I felt as ease admitting idnorance, asking for help, and even bringing in guest poets with expertise far greater than my own. Last, I was happy. I had made new friends; my own writing was improving, too. I was making contacts with writers and

publishers to meet my students' interests and I was reading more contemporary poetry than ever before -- and liking it better. Poetry, I realized, could do things I hadn't considered. It could allow people who read it and discussed it to come to grips with personal problems and unhappy experiences. It was allowing us to become tactful but acute critics, to see shared values and interests. Our group seemed to reach that point so rare in a classtoom at which no question is a risk if you truly want to know the answer. I had never been brave (or maybe smart) enough to reach that before on either side of a teacher's desk.

My other elder classes in expository prose, prose fiction, and poetry were structured along similar lines; student interests dictated text, discussion, and degree of emphasis on original work.

I taught one course in autobiograohy whose miserable failure further taught me why I enjoyed my Institute literature courses so much. The class took place at a senior apartment complex where the students resided. Students had been soliceted to join by a resident who wanted the course partly because of the publicity it would bring the complex, partly to develop the center's independence of city programs. The students, who paid a $4.00 fee, were not particularly interested in writing, but were extremely interested in talking -- to me, not to each other. And, of course, they all enjoyed seeing their pictures in a subsequent feature story. Class attendance was poor, writing was rough and infrequent, and class meetings tended to consist of discussions of other apartment residents, not of autobiography, writing, pr even personal memories, despite my best efforts. When I thought it out later, I realised that the students' expectations of the course and the subject matter had been passive; they would have preferred tape recorders to pens, and they were unwilling to make

commitment -- personal, physical or temporal -- to the class or to each other.

My Institute courses, on the other hand, required a lot of active commitment. Class meetings took time -- two hour hunks of it -- and preparation besides. Moreover, students had to travel to meeting sites; some students had to travel long distances. The course required a tuition and a text. And we all encouraged active interest and participation, daring and relishing our sessions of testing and exploring ideas. We all valued quality in writing, and that, more than anything, takes time, sweat, and active commitment. The externals -- cost, distance, and consideration of others -- don't create active commitment, but they help. I decided that all my future elder courses would make such demands.

Our semester books led to another idea: a real book, typeset, with illustrations. This became a possibility when an Institute administrator heard about some possible minigrants for publishing offered by the Texas Committee for the Humanities. Jim Tom Barton, the other Institute literature teacher, and I took a long time thinking about the grant, since neither of us had written or administered one before and since we were not sure how much work and expertise such a project would require. We talked over the possibility with our classes and decided that if funded, and if Jim Tom and I were to act as editors:

1) The book would contain submissions only by past and present Institute students of literature. We could not review the numbers of submissions an open contest would encourage.
2) Submissions would be accepted on the basis of quality alone; not everyone who submitted would be automatically accepted.
3) Except for editorial deletions and corrections, the works published would remain as they were written. Our book would be made up of pieces by elders, not "as told to" rewrites.

4) Members of our classes would be involved in as many areas of book production as possible to reduce costs and to involve everybody in the making of the book.

5) Illustrations (if any) would consist of line drawings by elders.

6) The theme of the book would be personal memoirs of the 1920's and 1030's.

We all got excited about the possible project, and spent a lot of class time thinking up good writing topics and possible titles.

Once Jim Tom and I actually began with the grant, work went well and quickly. The Texas Committee for the Humanities and Frances Leonard of the Texas Center for the Humanities were most helpful. The forms were easy to fill out and the rationale of the project as personal and regional history and as literature was easy to provide. Since Jim Tom Barton is a retired CPA, we were even able to develop a workable budget. The grant was awarded. We were ready to begin.

After advertising for new class members and nitifying former literature students about the publication, we began to discuss the kinds of writing that constitute good memoirs. We could only accept short pieces, 300-2,000 words long -- and poetry. Where to start?

The first problem was limiting. Events and memories are tangled; it's hard to explain one thing without explaining its complete context. Part of explaining context involves a sort of footnoting of phenomena that no longer exist. For example, how can a writer explain the pleasure of a new enamel icebox in 1922 without explaining that relatives from out of town had come to enjoy the event, adding who they were and what became of them, and explaining the complex routine of ordering ice and emptying the drip pan? None of these extra details significantly contribute to the moment itself: how happy and proud everybody felt about the new appliance.

Another problem appears: writer's block caused by the details that don't come back. How can you tell a story right if you don't remember every single detail?

I tried to solves these problems by suggesting some possible assignments: one was to use the senses to create a feeling of time, place, and moment rather than to explain it. The purpose would be to put the reader, no matter how far away from the writer's experience, right in the middle of it. Granted, not everything would be explained, but the important focus of the moment, the feelings and sensations, could be recreated. Moreover, in recreating the experience for somebody else, you find it easier not to remember the details, but to imagine them. Another assignment idea was to develop an expository essay involving your own experience from the period you discuss. A last was a limited personal narrative which vividly explained some particular aspect of the times.

A few stories need to be told, perhaps because they are so painful in the telling, stories of bad times and old hurts. For such stories I recommended distancing by fictionalizing names, places, and characters. These set the author apart from the subject matter and prevented the story from hurting any of the parties it once involved.

We had particularly good poetry submissions. These used sound, imagery and allusion to recreate scenes and moments. By the time we finished reviewing and selecting manuscripts, we found we had a far larger and even better collection than we had expected.

We involved our students with proofing and book design, and I was lucky in finding a talented elder illustrator to make original line drawings for our publication. However, advertising, promoting, organizing activities, and supervising the many details of book production fell to me. What I knew about publicity and publishing -- nothing -- soon gave way to necessity. With the help of a local

typesetter and a very cooperative local printer, we were able to produce an edition of 500 copies; we celebrated with a publishing party. Our Institute classes are now at work on a second volume of memoirs whose theme will be wartime America. We are all looking forward to making our new book.

I recently asked my students the kind of advice they would give to teachers interested in developing courses like ours. They said that while they were pleased with their semester books and with our publication, they wanted to stress the importance of the classes as a continuing source of intellectual stimulation. Thay felt that a supportive atmosphere for writers and the interest and commitment of the instructor were essentail. I pass these thoughts on to you. A collection of personal memoirs is a wonderful publication for a class to create, but it can't happen unless you have a group of authors willing to revise and act on criticism and with some ideas of their own about quality and style. It takes at least a semester of work to get all this started.

I'd like to make a few suggestions of my own about starting a course in writing for elders. First, find a sponsor, center, or activity group that will attract peoplw who are willing to take an active interest in witing. A continuing education program through a community college is ideal. Such a sponsor will have facilities for meetings, possible faculty, and access to libraries, literary groups, publicity, and guest speakers. That such a program can offer a variety of courses of interest to elders is to the advantage of the writing classes; interests often overlap and word gets around after a semester.

While you should be willing to meet the needs and interests of the classes you offer, you should also decide how much you are willing ahd able to do. Define your limits -- and ask your classes for help when you need it.

Be willing to devote time to planning, but be eager to delegate responsibility to class members. Get people to be in charge of keeping roll, of bringing refreshments, of collecting manuscripts for the semester book. This shared responsibility helps people contribute to the class as a group.

Last, plan on a coffeebreak. This kind of strictly social activity soon makes it easier for people to feel friendly and relaxed during class sessions.

Just how does a teacher go about preparing to teach such a course? I've prepared a short bibliography at the end of this paper with some good ideas for teaching poetry and autobiography. Please note that I do not include any readings except those that deal with teaching writing in innovative ways. I am not a gerontologist. You can expect elder classes to be <u>older</u>; this means more years, more memories, and some dimunition of physical abilities, such as sight, hearing, or stamina. It does <u>not</u> imply any particular ethical concerns or economic status. Nor does age mean that elders necessarily live idle or empty lives. Many of my class members have had to make time for writing among a variety of other activities. Expect elders who are willing to participate actively in a class to be motivated by interests, by inner rewards. Make this inner motivation a common bond: acknowledge it.

A writing teacher who works with al elder class can find many rewards. People genuinely motivated to write well, given positive encouragement and constructive criticism, people willing to make a hundred visions and revisions because they have images to develop and stories to tell will create vivid images and tell good stories. This is one particularly fine reward for their teacher. Another is the friendship that everyone in the class shares. The most rewarding

is the perspective an older mind can give a younger one. Prufrock would worry about eating peaches; they stain. He would roll his trousers as his body stooped and shrank. But he teaches us something important: it's all right to be a Polonius, even if it might have been more dashing to have been a Hamlet. Polonius has his good points; he's funny as well as helpful to others. We tend to forget that Prufrock's is a love song -- and that self acceptance begins with loving who you are, perhaps by explaining that self, as Prufrock does, to another person. That's the most and the best I have learned from my elder course at the Institute of Lifetime Learning: I dare to ask questions, I I dare to be wrong, and I am willing to take on new tasks and learn new disciplines -- ready or not.

This has been a personal approach to the special pedagogical and curriculum requirements of a writing course for elders. I'd like to close by suggesting some reasons why such courses are important for sponsoring agencies as well as for students and teachers.

First, elders of retirement age make up a populatation interested in pursuing humanities education. While this age group may not be in itself an income generating student oopulation, community agencies, foundations, and private donors can provide partial or matching support for elder continuing education. Specific class projects, like the students book my classes wrote and published, can easily find funding and can constitute a community resource and source of pride.

In summary, a writing course for elders can open new horizons for teachers, can valuably extend a continuing education curriculum, and, to students, can give the learning, discovery, and self awareness that study in the humanities can uniquely provide.

Katherine Staples
Austin Community College
1981

A Bibliography of Helpful Readings

Patricia Ann Case, How to Write Your Own Autobiography: Preserving Your Family Heritage. Santa Barbara: Woodbridge Press, 1977.
(Useful in class or for individual writing projects. Provides focus for remembering the key people and moments. Good exercie in limiting.)

Marc Kaminsky, What's Inside You It Shines Out of You. New York: Horizon Press, 1974.
(Describes Kaminsky's procedure and experiences with teaching poetry to the elderly in Jewish Senior Centers.)

Jack Leedy, Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders. New York: Lippincott, 1969.

Jack Leedy, Poetry the Healer. New York: Lippincott, 1974).
(Both of Leedy's works are important readings in poetry as therapy in discussions of literary texts.)

Robert Lyons, Autobiography: A Reader for Writers. New York: Oxford, 1977.
(A good reader for a group interested in memoirs and personal history.)

For a useful catalog of publications in the area of teaching writing and creative writing, write to:

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